Comox language

Comox or **Éy7á7juuthem** is a [Coast Salish language](#) historically spoken in the northern [Georgia Strait](#) region, spanning the east coast of Vancouver Island and the northern [Sunshine Coast](#) and adjoining inlets and islands. More specifically, ʔayajuθəm was traditionally spoken in Bute Inlet (also known as Church House), in Squirrel Cove (also known as Cortez Island), and in Sliammon, located in the area now known as Powell River.

It has two main dialects, Island Comox, associated with the [K'omoks First Nation](#), and Mainland Comox. Whereas there Comox speaks (Vancouver Island) Island dialect, the [Sliammon](#), [Klahoose](#), and Homalco peoples speak ʔayajuθəm, which is referred to by some as "Mainland Comox dialect". As of 2012, the Island Comox dialect has no remaining speakers.[2] The term *comox* is not a Comox word, but rather a Kwak'wala term meaning "plenty", "abundance", or "wealth". So Comox is not an ʔayajuθəm term, but is Wakashan based. ʔayajuθəm means "the language of our people" in Sliammon, Klahoose, and Homalco languages. Efforts to revitalize, rejuvenate, and revive ʔayajuθəm. In Powell River, Campbell River, and Cortez island have started projects to help save ʔayajuθəm. Children in daycare, preschool are being taught ʔayajuθəm in schools on [Cortez Island](#), [Campbell River](#) (the current city where many of the Homalco people have resettled) and is now being taught in school district #47 ([Powell River](#)). ʔayajuθəm is also being accepted as a second language that fulfills graduation requirements. In Powell River, ʔayajuθəm is taught from daycare through grade 12.

A community accord was signed in 2003 between Sliammon First Nation and the municipality of Powell River. The municipality of Powell River has started to place the traditional Sliammon names in addition to the settler names on signs found throughout the district.

Comox	
Éy7á7juuthem, *ʔayajuθəm*, *ɋ́y ʔɋ́y ʔɛmix ʷɋ́ɛn əm*	
Native to	Canada
Region	British Columbia
Ethnicity	2,037 Comox people in 3 of 4 communities (2018, FPCC).[1]
Native speakers	47 in 3 of 4 communities, unknown number in 4th community (2018, FPCC)[2]

Language family	Salishan
	  • Coast Salish
	    • Central
	      • **Comox**

Language codes	
ISO 639-3	coo
Glottolog	como1259 (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/como1259)[3

A Sliammon [iPhone](#) app was released in March 2012. An online dictionary, phrasebook, and language learning portal is available at [First Voices](#). In addition to the First Voices site, there are ʔayajuθəm dictionaries from Sliammon and Homalco, CD's containing ʔayajuθəm and children's books containing The ʔayajuθəm language are available throughout [Powell River](#), [Campbell River](#), and [Cortez Island](#).

Many Sliammon, Klahoose and Homalco do not identify as Comox, and Comox is seen by many separate and more closely linked to the kwakwaka'wakw people as Comox people speak this language. Island Comox became very rare in the late 1800s as Lekwiltok became the more common language spoken by the island Comox.

Contents

Phonology

Consonants

The consonants of Comox are depicted below in IPA and the Americanist orthography of H. R. Harris II and D. I. Kennedy when it differs from the IPA.

		Labial	Dental	Alveolar			Palatal	Velar		Uvular		Glottal
				central	sibilant	lateral		plain	labial	plain	labial	
Stop[1]	plain	p	t͡θ ⟨θ̂⟩	t	t͡s ⟨c⟩	t͡ɬ ⟨λ⟩	t͡ʃ ⟨ĉ⟩	k	kʷ	q	qʷ	
	ejective	p' ⟨ṕ⟩	t͡θ' ⟨θ̂'⟩	t' ⟨t́⟩	t͡s' ⟨ć⟩	t͡ɬ' ⟨λ́⟩	t͡ʃ' ⟨ĉ⟩	k' ⟨ḱ⟩	k'ʷ ⟨ḱʷ⟩	q' ⟨q́⟩	q'ʷ ⟨q́ʷ⟩	ʔ
	voiced						d͡ʒ ⟨j⟩[2]	g[2]				
Fricative			θ		s	ɬ ⟨ɬ⟩	ʃ ⟨ŝ⟩	x[3]	xʷ	χ ⟨x̲⟩	χʷ ⟨x̲ʷ⟩	h
Sonorant	plain	m		n		l[3]	j ⟨y⟩		w			
	glottalized	m' ⟨ḿ⟩		n' ⟨ń⟩		l' ⟨ĺ⟩[3]	j' ⟨ý⟩		w' ⟨ẃ⟩			

^1 The stops and affricates are grouped together for simplification purposes.
^2 Contrasts only on the surface.
^3 Occur probably only in borrowings and/or onomatopoetic words.

Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i		o
Mid		ʌ	
Open	e		a

Allophony

/i/ may be pronounced:

- [i] between ⟨ɫ⟩, palatal or velar (except for ⟨w⟩), non-glottalized consonants; between such a consonant and a final word boundary. There are also a certain number of grammatical environments where the tense form of the high front vowel is required.
- [e] after a ⟨w, w̓⟩, uvular or glottal consonant.
- [ɪ] elsewhere

/e/ may be pronounced:

- [e] in the same conditions as [i].
- [ɛ] elsewhere

/u/ may be pronounced:

- [u] in the same conditions as [i].
- [o] elsewhere

/a/ may be pronounced:

- [æ] between ⟨ɫ⟩, palatal or velar (except for ⟨w⟩) consonants.
- [a] elsewhere

/ʌ/ may be pronounced:

- [i] before a ⟨y⟩.
- [ɪ] after a ⟨ɫ⟩, palatal or velar (except for ⟨w⟩) consonant.
- [ʊ] following a velar rounded consonant (except for ⟨w⟩).
- [ə] elsewhere.[4]
- [o] before a ⟨w⟩.
- [ɔ] after a ⟨w, w̓⟩ or uvular rounded consonant.
- [a] stressed before a ⟨w, w̓⟩ or uvular consonant. [5]

Morphology

"Salishan languages are highly polysynthetic, employing numerous suffixes and reduplication patterns; prefixes and infixes are less numerous. Words often include lexical suffixes referring to concrete physical objects or abstract extensions from them."[6]

Comox has essentially lost all derivational prefixes. It is the only language in the Salish family to have lost the nominalizing prefix *s-* from its morphological inventory (Kroeber 11).[7] However, the morphologically mirrored -*s* interestingly serves as a marker for 3rd person possession (Kroeber 111). Hagège has found certain cases where

both the prefixive *s-* and the suffixive *-s* occur in circumspection. Kroeber is wary to support the finding, but offers the following: "This would appear to be a complex of the nominalizing prefix *s-* and the third person possessive *-s*; that is, the third person form of the sort of nominalized construction widely used for subordination in Salish."(Kroeber 115).

In his review of Hagège's grammar of the language,[8] Paul D. Kroeber states, "After diminutive CV reduplication, all CVC roots lose their vowel, regardless of what the vowel is." (109) Kroeber gives the following example: *wot'-o-t* 'bend it', *wo-wt'-o-t* 'bend it a little bit' (109).

The affixes representing possession in Comox are much different than those of their Salishan counterparts. 1st person singular (*ç-*) and plural (*ms-*) and 2nd person singular (*θ-*) appear as prefixes, while 2nd person plural (*-ap*) and 3rd person (*-s*) appear as suffixes (Kroeber 111).[9]

Grammatical categories

Number

"Reduplicated counting forms with explicit reference to 'people' can be found in a large number of different Salish languages. All the basic formal shapes of reduplication in Salish (CVC-, CV-, and –VC) may be used to create the 'people' counting forms." (412).[10]

Comox numbers for 'people':

- 1 – *páʔa*
- 2 – *sáʔa*
- 3 – *čálas*
- 4 – *mus*
- 5 – *síyačix*
- 6 – *t'áxam*
- 7 – *c'oʔčis*
- 8 – *táʔčis*
- 9 – *tígyixw*
- 10 – *úpan*

Comox uses CV reduplication to mark its 'people' counting forms (419–420).

- *pí-paʔa* ('1 person')
- *sí-saʔa* ('2 people')

Control

"Control [volitional] may be seen as marking the subject of the verb as a prototypical agent: the subject wants the event to occur and has the capabilities that would normally ensure that (s)he could bring about the desired event. Noncontrol [nonvolitional] signals that the subject departs in some way from prototypical agentivity; the event occurs accidentally or is something that the subject did only with difficulty" (Kroeber 155–156).

 tʼuçʼ-ut-as
 shoot-CTr-3Sb
'he shot it (on purpose), tried to shoot it'

t'uç'-əxʷ-as
shoot-NTr-3Sb

'he shot it (accidentally), managed to shoot it'

The inceptive reduplication of Comox is closely tied to the marking of control. In words like *tih* 'big', -VC reduplicates to create the inceptive form *tih-ih* 'get big'. Control is then marked by further affixation: "The CTr suffix regularly has the form *-at* after –VC" (Kroeber 159).

xʷah-at-uɫ   č   tih-ih-at-as
tell-CTr-Past 1sSb big-VC-CTr-3Sb

'I told him to make it big'

Duratives

"The durative is used for activities carried out over an extended period or habitually, such as a means of employment" (Mithun 168). Thus, duratives demonstrate intervallic aspect. Here is an example of a durative in Comox:

xʷuxʷ-mut   ʔuɫqʷu
long.time-very dig.clams

'he dug clams for a long time'

Inceptive

"An inceptive prefix can mark the gradual, beginning stages of an event or state" (Mithun 169).[11] In Comox, this is largely achieved through –VC reduplication. The following example illustrates this process:

- *pəs-əs* 'get numb' (*pəs* 'numb')
- *tih-ih* 'get big' (*tih* 'big')

Syntax

As is the case for all Salish languages, Comox is predicate-initial. Czaykowski-Higgins and Kinkade (1998) state, "VSO (verb-subject-object) is most commonly said to be the preferred word order in most Salish languages, with postpredicate word order nevertheless being fairly free" (37). Kroeber (1999) confirms this information and expounds upon it by stating, "in all Salish languages, the predicate is most often clause-initial, followed by nominal expressions and prepositional phrases coding participants in the event" (37). He further notes that prepositional phrases generally represent obliques, leaving subjects and objects unmarked (38).[7][12]

Word Classification

In addition to the loss of derivational prefixes, Comox has also lost the nominalizer prefix in many of its uses. Further, there is extant ambiguity as to the ability – or need – to classify certain words as 'noun' or 'verb' within the Salish family. An example of the uncertainty is the word *ʔiɫtən*, which can appear as both a noun and a verb, and is identified through the results of its affixation. Kroeber (1999) provides the following example:

verb:

ʔiɫtən ʔiɫtən‿čxʷ

'eat'   'you eat'

noun:

ʔiɬtən tə‿ʔiɬtən-s
'food'   'his/her food'

The word *ʔiɬtən* in these examples is semantically similar though grammatically contrasted. The suffixation present in the first instance marks the word as a verb and also indicates person, in this case the second. The prefix and suffix in the latter instance nominalize the word, possession designated as seen earlier by the suffix *-s* (34–35).[7]

Complements of Negative Predicates

In Coast Salish languages, all but Squamish feature subject-predicate mirroring – a sort of clausal concord – in person and number. To illustrate this point, here are examples from Catlotlq and Squamish:

Catlotlq –

xʷaʔ‿č   qəjiy-an   p'ap'im
not‿1s.SU.CL still-1s.CJ.SU work
'I'm not still working'

Squamish –

háw q‿ʔan‿c'ic'áp   ti‿scíʔs
not   IRR‿1s.CJ.SU‿work ART‿today
'I do not work today'

In the Catlotlq example, the negating predicate assumes the same person and number as the subject. Conversely, the Squamish negating predicate remains unmarked. The difference between Squamish and Coast Salish languages in this case, is the irrealis marker *q-* on the subject, a common feature of non-Salish languages.[7]

Oblique

Like its fellow Coast Salish languages, Catlotlq utilizes a single preposition, *ʔə*, to mark the oblique (Kroeber, 45). Below are two examples:

pəqʷs-a-t-as   ʔə‿tə‿qaʔya
enter.water-LV-TR-3.TR.SU OBL‿ART‿water
'He dropped it in the water'

hu‿št‿əm   xapj-a-mi   (ʔə)‿kʷə‿θ‿tuwa
go‿1p.SU.CL‿FUT return-TR-2s.OB OBL‿ART‿2s.PO‿be.from
'We will send you back to where you came from'

Interestingly, the oblique marker in these examples also serves a locative purpose, identifying where the object was dropped and the individual's original orientation. The subjects and objects in both phrases are, true to form, unmarked by preposition.

Transitivity

Transitivity in Catlotlq has several suffix paradigms. With respect to one of these paradigms, Harris states, "object suffixes preced[ing] subject suffixes" (50). He offers first a list of object pronouns as they appear with transitive roots and then gives examples of each of them in their respective environments.

The objective pronouns on transitive roots are:

-s- me   *-tulmoɫ-* us

-sɪ- you(sg.)   *-tanapi-* you(pl.)

-t- him, her, it *-t(ʌwʔ)-* them

Applied to the root 'called':

1. *yáɫasʌs* He called me.
2. *yáɫasɪs* He called you.
3. *yáɫatʰčan* I called him.
4. *yáɫatulmoɫʌs* He called us.
5. *yáɫatanapɪs* He called you.
6. *yáɫatewʔčan* I called them.

In relation to transitivity, Catlotlq also demonstrates the benefactive suffix with the suffix *ʔʌm* (Harris, 52). Following the objective pronouns given in the previous example, the next set of data (Harris, 53) illustrates the benefactive suffix:

1. *sɪqʔʌmsas* He dug it for me.
2. *sɪqʔʌmsɪs* He dug it for you.
3. *sɪqʔʌmtas* He dug it for him.
4. *sɪqʔʌmtulmoɫas* He dug it for us.
5. *sɪqʔʌmtanapɪs* He dug it for you (pl.).
6. *sɪqʔʌmtasewʔ* He dug it for them.

Mithun (1999) explains: "A benefactive applicative allows beneficiaries to be cast as direct objects" (247). Thus, the transitivity not only denotes direction, but a benefactor and the recipient.

Tense

Future

Harris (1981) states, "there are three explicit tenses in Comox: the past, the present, and the future" (72). He first looks at the future tense marked by the morpheme *-sʌm,* noting that "if the preceding pronoun ends in a [t] the [s] is dropped" (73).

1. *tahathčxwsʌm tʌ kyutʌn*
   You'll feed the horse.
2. *hojoth čtʌm tʌms qaɫʌm*
   We'll finish the job.

3. *sɪqʔʌmčʌpsʌm ʌkʷ qaʔʌya*
   You'll dig the well

4. *yaqašsʌm tʌ cɪxcɪk*
   He'll use the wagon.

Harris continues by stating that if the future morpheme occurs after [č], the [č] becomes [c] and the [s] is dropped (73).

5. *mat' atʰcʌm tʌ λ'ʌms*
   I'll paint the house.

Past

The underlying form of the past tense is marked by the morpheme, *ʔoɬ*, with surface forms including that mentioned and *oɬ*, the latter occurring after consonants (73). The following list shows the past tense in its various phonological environments:

1. *kʷačxʷi yʌqtoɬ*
   Have you bought that?

2. *kʷačxʷ kʌmgyxʷoɬ*
   Did you meet him?

3. *kyakyačoɬčʌtʰ*
   We were playing cards.

4. *xʌypʌnomsoɬčaxʷ*
   You startled me.

5. *xanaseʔoɬč ʔɪšɪms č'aʔʌnuʔ*
   I gave you our dog.

6. *soʔoɬč ʌkʷʰ ʔahkʷtʰ*
   I went downstream.

7. *tihʔoɬčxʷ*
   You were big.

Present

Harris concludes his treatment of tense by stating, "the present in Comox is the unmarked tense although it is not clear that every unmarked predicate has the force of the present as an explicit factor of meaning" (76).[5] That is, the lack of marking presents a certain amount of ambiguity as to the designation of tense.

Lexical Suffixes

Lexical suffixes in Salishan languages have referential meaning.[5] That is, "they refer to things as body parts, shapes and concrete objects, and are part of the semantic derivation of a stem" (116). In the next two sections of examples, suffix referents to body parts and objects will be presented. The English gloss for *jɪšɪn* is 'foot, leg' but the referential suffix is the truncated -*šɪn*, which appears in the following (117):

1. *qʷasšɪnč* I burnt my foot

2. *λ'ešɪn* Fast

3. *paʔašɪn* Crane(one-legged)

A truncated -*ɬaɬ* similarly assumes the role of *sáyɬaɬ* or 'neck' in the following (117):

1. *qʷasɫaɫč* I burnt my neck
2. *totxʷɫaɫ* Necklace

Lastly, here are examples of *mʌ́qsɪn* ('nose') whose referential suffix, *-ɛqʷ*, bears no orthographic semblance to its root (118–119):

1. *čaʔʌjeʌmɛqʷ* to have an itchy nose
2. *λʌsseʌqʷsɪcʌm* I'm going to hit you on the nose
3. *tihhɛqʷ* big nose

In the case of object reference, some lexical suffixes have the single affix form, though many also derive from a root. The former is the case for identification of containers with the suffix *-ayi* (119):

1. *lamayi* bottle (liquor(rum)-container)
2. *jamayi* jar (jam-container)

The object referential suffix for canoe derives from the root *nʌxʷíɫ* and surfaces as *-ʌgɪɫ* (120):

1. *qʌxʷʌqɪɫ* left side of a canoe
2. *ʔaʔʌjumʌqɪɫ* right side of a canoe

Language Status

As of 1983, only two L1 speakers of the Island Comox were surviving, an aunt and niece, the aunt born in 1900. (Kennedy and Bouchard, 23). In a later publication, Kennedy and Bouchard (1990), stated that, whether as an L1 or L2, "in the 1980s, Mainland Comox continued being spoken fluently by about one-third of the population and was the most viable of all Salishan languages" (Kennedy and Bouchard, 443). Czaykowska-Higgins and Kinkade (1990) reported in the same year that the number of Island Comox speakers was one, while the mainland Sliammon maintained less than 400 (64).[13] Today, Ethnologue estimates that there are roughly 40 speakers of Catlotlq, the majority of whom are L2 speakers. Ethnologue also lists Catlotlq as being ranked at an 8 on the Fishman scale of language loss severity, which reads: "most vestigial users of Xish are socially isolated old folks and Xish needs to be reassembled from their mouths and memories and taught to demographically unconcentrated adults" (Hinton, 49).[14][15]

Bibliography

1. Comox language (https://www.ethnologue.com/18/language/coo/) at *Ethnologue* (18th ed., 2015)
2. Comox (https://www.ethnologue.com/21/language/coo) at *Ethnologue* (21st ed., 2018)
3. Hammarström, Harald; Forkel, Robert; Haspelmath, Martin, eds. (2017). "Comox" (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/como1259). *Glottolog 3.0*. Jena, Germany: Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History.
4. Smithsonian Institution Handbook of North American Indians, Vol.7 Northwest Coast (1990), pp.441
5. Harris, H. R., II (1981) A grammatical sketch of Comox (Doctoral Dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 8128776)
6. Smithsonian Institution handbook of North American Indians, Vol. 7 Northwest Coast, pp.33
7. Kroeber, P. D. (1999) *The Salish language family: Reconstructing syntax*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
8. Hagège, Claude. *Le Comox lhaamen de Colombie britannique : présentation d'une langue amérindienne*. Amerindia, numéro spécial, Paris, Association d'Ethnolinguistique Amérindienne, 1981, 187 pp. (ISBN 9782903801014).
9. International Journal of American Linguistics Vol. 55 No. 1 Jan. 1989.

10. International Journal of American Linguistics , Vol. 65, No. 4 (Oct., 1999) , pp. 412–420

11. International Journal of American Linguistics , Vol. 54, No. 2 (Apr., 1988) , pp. 141–167

12. Czaykowski-Higgins, E., and Kinkade, M. D. (1998) Salish languages and linguistics: Theoretical and descriptive perspectives. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.

13. Kennedy, D., and Bouchard, R. (1983) Sliammon life, Sliammon lands. Vancouver: Talonbooks.

14. https://www.ethnologue.com/languages/coo

15. Hinton, L. (2003) Language revitalization. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics (vol. 23, pp 44–57). USA: Cambridge University Press.

- Sapir, Edward (1915). *Noun reduplication in Comox, a Salish language of Vancouver island* (https://archive.org/details/nounreduplicatio00sapirich). Ottawa: Government Printing Office.

External links

- Sliammon at First Voices: The ɬəʔamɛn Language group welcomes you (http://www.firstvoices.com/en/Sliammon)
- OLAC resources in and about the Comox language (http://www.language-archives.org/language/coo)